Remarks delivered by Dr. Robert Blum at the National Truancy Prevention Conference

Prior research has shown that there's a strong connection, a strong association, between school connectedness and a wide range of outcomes for young people. For example, when you look at substance abuse—and this is for alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana—in going down the bottom, the horizontal axis is school connectedness. Going across the top are levels of school connectedness. And what you see dramatically is that as school connectedness increases, alcohol, cigarette, and marijuana use declines. And I will tell you, this has nothing to do with substance abuse education that's done in the schools. Nothing. This has everything to do with how kids feel about the schools to which they attend and belong.

Let's look at emotional distress, and again, this is emotional distress overall, and suicidality, suicide thoughts and attempts. As school connectedness increases, emotional distress declines, and suicidal thoughts and attempts decline. School connectedness is strongly related to positive emotional health.

When we look at pregnancy—and this has nothing to do with condom distribution programs, abstinence education programs, comprehensive sex education programs; it has

everything to do with human relations—as connectedness with an adult in school increases, pregnancy—these are percent of kids reporting pregnancy—declines.

Is this mere coincidence? Is this just statistical artifacts? I don't think so. When you look at other research, what we see is that when school connectedness is low, transition to smoking is more rapid. And I will tell you something else. And that is when school connectedness is high and kids have started to smoke, their likelihood of going on to become a regular smoker goes down, and their likelihood of ceasing smoking goes up— independent of any smoking prevention program.

Human relations. High teacher support is associated with higher interest in math. That's a no-brainer. Connectedness is strongly related to GPA, for both boys and girls. And this is not—you can sit back and say, "Well, sure, c'mon, you're talking about the smarter kids." I'm not talking about the smarter kids. I'm not talking about the ones that are more intellectually gifted. Because I'll tell you, from some of the work that we've done, the kids who are more academically challenged and disadvantaged, kids with learning disabilities, have higher levels of school connectedness than other kids. I know it is about human relations that makes the difference.

High school attachment—not "high school," *high* school attachment—is associated with less initiation of violence. And a lack of attachment to school is associated with increased risks of unemployment after school. Connection with school has long-term, not just short-term, pay-off. When we look internationally, at studies around the world, we see the same thing occurring. School connectedness is strongly associated with health outcomes and

with education outcomes. And in a four-country study in Scandinavia, school climate was strongly associated with school satisfaction and with performance. In a nine-country study that we did in the Caribbean, school connectedness was the single most protective factor for adolescent health risk behaviors. The single most—more important than family. And I would suggest that for many of our kids, and in our schools, and in our courts, and in our juvenile centers, where there is not family, the contexts other than family where they encounter adults are the most important forces in their lives.

What are the factors associated with enhanced school connectedness? Well, what we see as the factors, some of them I think are relatively obvious, and perhaps some less so. School retention in large percentages of our young people is not by definition a negative, though it frequently becomes so by the way it is implemented. But when school retention is done for academic purposes, and when it associated with school transfer, it improves school connectedness. Strongly associated is student perception of teacher support, school safety, and less classroom disturbance. People say, "Well, metal detectors. That must turn kids off and make them disconnected." And the truth of the matter and the bottom line is that it's what happens on the other side of the metal detectors, not what happens passing through the metal detectors. I have been in schools when there are police in every corner of the corridor, and those schools are not safe at all. And there are other schools that have no visible police in equally dangerous and difficult environments, and they're very safe. It isn't the presence or lack of presence of those things, but school safety does matter.

Justice, fairness, in school matters hugely, and anyone in this room who is a parent knows very well that every child has a clear and distinct notion of what is fair because at our dinner table, over the years, the number of times we heard the statement, "It just isn't fair," was said over and over again, and more times than not they were right. It wasn't fair that Johnny Smith, who was drunk on the basketball team and couldn't even get off the bench, didn't get a suspension. It wasn't fair. And so it goes, and so many rules— rules are applied unfairly. Kids see that rules are applied unfairly, and they conclude this institution is not fair. They know when it's fair, and they would know when the power brokers in the school get the same punishment as every other kid.

They listen to the music as well as the words. Positive classroom management—I'll talk more about that in just a moment. Less punitive disciplinary policies. What we see is schools that have zero-tolerance policies have kids who are continuously on guard. It does not create a positive school environment in any way that we have been able to identify. Our data is limited, it only involves 20,000 kids that I'm basing that on, but that is a pretty large national sample. And school size does matter. For kids to feel connected, in fact, school size matters more than classroom size. Though for classrooms it matters a lot for learning. In terms of school environments, schools that are larger than about 900 do not have the capacity for human interactions that smaller schools do. School culture matters, and school bonds that are created reinforce the norms of the group to which kids feel connected. If the leading crowd in the school—you know, the cool kids, the leading crowd—values education, the entire academic performance of the school goes up because

that group sets the tone to which everyone else aspires. So with this as a backdrop, what are some of the things that come from this wingspread declaration?

First of all, what is it that we mean when we talk about school connectedness? It means that students are more likely to succeed when they feel connected to school. And school connection is the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning and care about them as an individual. Two things. It isn't just that "they like me," it is that "they like me and they expect big things of me." Those two in combination.

The critical requirements of school connectedness: one is high academic expectations and rigor, coupled with support for learning. Set the bar high. If you set the bar low—Jonathan Cousel wrote about this in the mid 1960s—kids will crawl under the bar and fail.

Positive adult-student relationships. Every adult in this school matters, and they matter hugely, and the administration in the school sets the tone of how teachers are treated, how the janitors and food staff are treated, and they in turn treat the kids the way they are treated. And safety, both physical and emotional safety. The three critical requirements of kids feeling connected. And this is, as I say, based on endless research. If you want the citations, they are all documented in the reference report.

When we look at the outcomes, increasing the numbers of students connected to school is likely to impact academic performance; it's likely to impact incidence incidents of

fighting, bullying, vandalism, absenteeism, and school completion rates. Some of the things, from what I hear, that schools are held accountable for.

There is strong scientific evidence that shows that increased school connection impacts educational motivations. Kids try harder, and they work harder, at whatever their intellectual endowment. They're more engaged in schools, they have improved school attendance, and these three factors—educational motivation, classroom engagement, and improved school attendance—in turn increases academic achievement. And this relationship—motivation, engagement and attendance—applies to every single group at every socioeconomic level in America. Students who feel connected are less likely to exhibit destructive behavior, school violence, substance use, emotional distress, and early age of first sex.

I come from the health field. I have been very much involved over the years with the debates that surround sex education in our schools. And I would suggest that we would accomplish far more for our children if we gave up those debates, because you know very well that what makes a difference for your kids is what makes a difference for every kid. For my kids, it wasn't that they had a condom in their back pocket, and it wasn't because I ever lectured them about abstinence. It's because they had an attainable future. An attainable future. And they had adults who were watching them and said, "You matter." Sex education makes a difference, and I don't want to say that it doesn't, but it makes a marginal difference. What makes a central difference are the human beings who are

invested in the lives of these kids. And if nobody is invested, it doesn't matter what you say.

What are some of the effective strategies? What do we know from a generation of really, I think, extraordinary work? Well, we know that implementing high standards and expectations and providing academic support to all students matters. Applying fair and consistent policies matter. Disciplinary policies. Creating trusting relations among students, teachers, staff, administrators, and families matter. We know that capable teachers who know how to teach matter tremendously, and they need to be skilled and content in teaching techniques and classroom management and meeting student needs. Fostering parent collaborations and expectations matter.

Leon Dash, the Pulitzer Prize winning journalist for *The Washington Post*—and he left the *Post* a couple of years ago—has written some extraordinary books. One is *When Children Want Children,* and this is a portrait of five very low-income girls from the poorest of poor sections in Washington. And one was Rosalee. Rosalee is a portrait of a woman who died at the age of about 54. She was a prostitute, a heroin addict, had five children. Three of them followed her pathway; two of them didn't and went on to live stable and successful lives. She died as an addict and died from HIV. And he got to know her intimately, and it's an extraordinary portrait of a human being. And at the end of her life, he said, "Rosalee, is there anything that you regret?" And this is a woman who had a lifetime of regret. And she said, "Yes, one thing." She said, "I never knew what a difference education would have mattered for my children. If I knew it, I would have

dealt with their schooling differently." Extraordinary. To me that's extraordinary. And it's true. Parents who have high expectations for their kids' academic performance have kids who not only do better academically but are less involved with every crummy behavior that we care about. Parental expectations matter. If parents as well as teachers increase the bar for their kids, get to know their teachers, ask about homework assignments and tests, that level of interest makes a difference.

Ensuring that every student feels close to at least one supportive adult in schools. So what are a few of the things from the research that specifically we know? One, at an administration level, an administration that's committed to authoritative rather than authoritarian leadership, where kids are involved in framing the policies of the school in which they live, and where everyone has a voice in the sense that they can be heard. School rules that are equitably applied. A clear academic mission. You know, it's fascinating. You go into the Holiday Inn or any hotel, and if you look—and do, I'm being very serious—behind the door the employees go in and out of, more often than not, you see, right back there, a mission statement. A mission statement for the hotel. Have you ever gone into a school and seen the mission statement posted at every corner? Why did they do it for the Holiday Inn? Don't they know something? That if we are clear about our mission, people buy into that. Sure everyone says, "Of course, our mission is education, and our mission is our kids." It is. Are we clear about that mission?

An orderly environment. A colleague of mine who does, I think, extraordinary work in the schools, Friburg, said, "Three places you should go. You want to see, learn

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everything you need to about a school. One, you stand in a hallway at break time, the change between classes. Two, you go into the lunchroom. And three, you go into the bathroom. You look at the graffiti in the bathroom, you look at the amount of noise and things being thrown in the lunchroom, and you watch how the adult monitors in the hallway are treating the kids at intervals between classes. That'll tell you about our school environments."

Reduce the noise level in school at the lunchroom. Use the school's social climate assessment tool to say we're conscious about our school climate. Set high academic standards that everyone knows about and buys into. At the school administration level, develop school-wide community service projects, an opportunity to bring the whole school community together with the community in which they're based. Where does self-esteem come from? It doesn't come from self-esteem building exercises. It comes from the opportunity to do something for someone else. That's where your self-esteem comes from, and that's where kids' self-esteem comes from. The opportunity to do that on a collective basis creates positive school environments. Creates more learning environments.

Assure that parents are well-informed. Newsletters home. So often, parents say, "the only time I hear about my kid is when he's in trouble." To hear about them when they're not in trouble doesn't hurt. Foster team teaching, so that the collective of teachers knows about what's going on with a given student, and attend to the affective as well as the academic needs of students. Some of our kids come from such horrendous environments

at home and in their neighborhood that focusing on school is not simply anything they can do. And our awareness of that, not to excuse it, not to say, "Therefore I'm going to lower the bar so you don't have to learn," but rather to support it, to say, "I can be there so you can learn," is what we need to be about. At the classroom level, democratic classrooms make very much a difference.

I skipped one—high academic expectations. Consistent classroom management techniques. Where consequences and rules. . . . So one strategy at the classroom level is to post the rules. At the beginning of the year, teachers and students will say, "What are the rules we want to live by here? You know, we're a family, let's set the rules, let's put them up, let's talk about the consequences, so when something is an infraction, it's not a secret. We talk about it, and we talk about how we want to do it differently as a classroom next time."

Cooperative learning, where shared activities between students. Strengthened parent-teacher relationships—notes home, memos, letters. Use of behavioral and cognitive behavioral educational techniques, such as modeling and role-playing (a lot of role-playing), are things that kids can relate to and understand. Individual student goal setting. Sitting down periodically during the year, setting not just academic goals, but behavioral goals. Not to forgive the past, but to learn from it, to say, "What do we want to do differently next time?" And peer-assisted teaching, an opportunity for kids to give to other kids. And if their skills aren't academic, maybe they're athletic, maybe they're manual. To be able to help others in the school community. Creating democratic

classrooms. I've heard over time now so many wonderful examples, and one is to have a bowl in the front of the classroom, and when you ask a question, instead of kids raising their hands and calling on the kids with the hands raised, the teacher just reaches in and pulls out a name and asks a question of the person on the paper, and then puts the name back in the bowl. They learn two things, they learn statistical distribution of random choice, and they experience a democratic classroom.

Experiential learning and participatory education for kids to get their hands dirty. I think it's today that Westinghouse is giving out science awards. I heard this morning these two unbelievable kids. I said, "Are these high school kids who are winning awards for creativity?" Why? Because they had a teacher who said, "Go out and come up with an experiment and I'll work with you on it. Not that you're going to replicate my boring experiment." Whereas our kids did have to build the same mobile cart that was built for the last millennium, but stimulated some intellectual curiosity. And one of the kids said, "How did you ever think of this?" And one of them said, "My teacher told us a story. My teacher told us a story, and I am a finalist for a $100,000 scholarship because my teacher told us a story."

Embed prevention strategies and programs into regular instruction. Use English and literature to teach the lessons. Use mathematics. Don't segregate things out. Involve students in curriculum planning, in choosing group assignments. Use team learning. All of these strategies over and again. Involve all of the kids in the class on a rotating basis for jobs, so that each one has something positive to contribute to the school climate.

Share positive reports of student behaviors home. Use classroom meetings to discuss conflict. Don't hide conflict. Talk about it. Develop routines and rituals for the class. Much like at home, routines and rituals allow for things to be predictable and for things to be celebrated. Develop and teach conflict resolution, and problem solving is part of it. And involve students as teachers, they have much to offer.

We have learned a vast amount over the last 20 years about the role of school in the lives of young people. And we have learned a vast amount of what makes a difference. It is not that we don't have more to learn, but I think, more importantly, we need to have the will to implement what we already know. Clearly, you all work day to day trying to do that. I hope that what we can begin together to do is to convince those who say that "What we need to be about in our school is academic performance. We need to be about hard measures of performance," that building schools with strong connections between our kids and the teachers and the administration is the way to get there. And a by-product, I will assure you, is a reduction in every risk behavior that compromises our kids' health and well-being. Thank you very much.